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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000873

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2016

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: ELECTORAL REFORM COMMISSION MEMBER:  
"MADLY PARANOIAC" MARONITES SABOTAGED ELECTORAL LAW

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)  
) and (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a 3/16 meeting, national electoral reform commission member Paul Salem blamed what he called a "madly paranoiac" Maronite community for sabotaging efforts to reform the electoral law. Had the commission's two Maronite members -- Ziyad Baroud and Michel Tabet -- not resigned, he claimed, the resulting draft law would have done more to guarantee Christian communal interests than any single piece of legislation in Lebanon's history. He said the two resigned under mounting pressure from political heavies in "Maronite-istan," and blamed them for remaining silent while populist politicians exploited their community's fear of disenfranchisement. Salem said that commission chair Fouad Boutros is, because of his advanced age, unable to defend his commission's work and deliver a completed draft law to government. Meanwhile, according to Salem, Prime Minister Siniora, Sa'ad Hariri, and Walid Jumblatt were only too happy to sit back and watch the Maronites destroy any prospects for electoral reform. Salem asked the USG and the international community to help bring Baroud and Tabet back to the negotiating table, and to persuade Maronite leaders, particularly the Patriarch, that participation in the electoral reform process is in their community's, and Lebanon's, best interest. End summary.

POPULISM AND PARANOIA

2. (C) On March 16, emboffs called on national electoral reform commission member Paul Salem. Salem -- who, along with chairman Fouad Boutros, is one of the commission's two Greek Orthodox Christians -- said he was amazed at what he called the Maronite community's "madly paranoiac" penchant for self-destruction. He said that, over the past two weeks, Lebanon's Maronites had fallen into the grip of a collective psychosis over the electoral law, seeing conspiracies in every corner and obsessed with dark fantasies of betrayal at the hands of Lebanon's other confessional groups. Even educated, intelligent individuals were suddenly showing signs of "stunning ignorance." For example, Aoun bloc MP Farid al-Khazen, Salem's former colleague in the political science department of the American University of Beirut, was publicly denouncing the national commission's draft law as "another Ghazi Kana'an law," referring to the former Syrian military intelligence "proconsul" in Lebanon who crafted the unpopular

electoral law of the year 2000, still in effect.

ZIAD BAROUD, CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS,  
RESIGNS FROM THE COMMISSION  
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13. (C) Salem was obviously disappointed at the two Maronites' resignation, especially that of Ziad Baroud, who has been a longtime friend and colleague. Salem speculated, however, that in the end, Baroud was unable to extricate himself from Maronite communal politics, probably concluding he would compromise himself if he stayed on the commission. "Ziad just got stuck in the middle," Salem explained. "He's always had one foot in civil society and one foot in 'Maronite-land.' It just got to be too much. He felt that he couldn't present the real Maronite desires to the commission. He couldn't present the Maronite view and maintain his credibility. So he resigned."

14. (C) Salem dismissed the impact of Tabet's resignation, saying he primarily did it to show solidarity with Baroud, and because it presented a way to exit a commission on which he had never been enthusiastic about serving. "His heart was never in it. Tabet has always wanted to resign since the moment we started."

PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE  
DRAFT LAW, ITS FUTURE, AND MAYBE TA,IF TOO  
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15. (C) Salem, normally one of the most optimistic members of the commission, was pessimistic that the current electoral reform project would have any success at all. He criticized Baroud and Tabet for initiating a dangerous game by playing

BEIRUT 00000873 002 OF 004

the "sectarian card." In resigning from the commission, Salem explained, they not only put an immediate halt to the reform process, but also potentially undermined the basic foundation of the 1989 Ta,if Agreement. That is, by making such an aggressive play to maximize Maronite representation, they encouraged other confessions to do the same, Salem said.

16. (C) It is widely acknowledged, Salem continued, that the Shi'ites are still under-represented in the Ta,if formula. If Hizballah and Amal decide to follow the Maronite precedent set by Baroud and Tabet, it would shatter the sectarian balance that has been the foundation of Lebanon's (relative) stability for the past 15 years. "This is a dangerous game," Salem cautioned, especially considering that either of the two major districting plans considered by the commission would have been the best electoral law the Christians have ever had, allowing pluralities of Christian voters to select as many as 58 of the 64 seats allotted to Christians in Parliament.

17. (C) Now, Salem speculated, Lebanon has one or two weeks to convince Baroud, Tabet, and the Maronites to come back to the commission, resume talks, and agree on a districting plan. Otherwise, he said, the damage to the commission's credibility will be so great as to scuttle the project entirely. Salem argued that the Maronites are convinced the electoral law is a plan to destroy them, that Fouad Boutros is too weak to defend the law, and that the Sa'ad Hariri-led majority in Parliament is eager to let electoral reform die on the vine.

18. (C) Salem has been performing daily newspaper and television interviews to mollify Maronite fears that the electoral reform process will disenfranchise Christians, but he is frustrated at being the lone voice. Boutros is too old and tired to do so, while none of the Muslim members can step in because they would not enjoy credibility with the Maronite community on the matter. "I'm the only one," said Salem, frustrated at the silence of Baroud and Tabet. He argued

that their media silence only fed Maronite fears that the election law was a plot against them. "If they really resigned for technical reasons, they need to come out and say it."

¶9. (C) Salem agreed that the call by Fayez Hajj Chahine -- the commission's Greek Catholic member -- to replace Baroud and Tabet was unrealistic in the face of a Maronite solidarity. The only chance for success, he said, was to get Baroud and Tabet back to the table. Otherwise, Salem warned, "We'll see a collapse of the whole effort. There will be no election law. No early elections. No good elections. In 2009 they'll just slap something together a few weeks before the elections and we'll be stuck with the same system."

#### PUTTING ELECTORAL REFORM BACK ON TRACK

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¶10. (C) Salem said the Maronites must be convinced that it is in their best interest to return to the table and negotiate in good faith. The problem, he said, is that there are no responsible Maronite leaders with the clout to convince the Maronites to come back. He dismissed Michel Aoun and Samir Ja'ja' as populists who are cheaply exploiting Maronite fears of marginalization. Salem thought that Nassib Lahoud could be reasonable enough, but that he doesn't have the credibility to convince Maronite extremists.

¶11. (C) The Maronite Patriarch, according to Salem, does not even understand the electoral law. In a sense, however, "he doesn't have to. He just needs to understand that it won't hurt (the Maronites)." Salem thought that the Patriarch's sermon two Sundays ago, in which he refused to select two new Maronite commission members and called on Baroud and Tabet to rejoin the commission, was helpful. Salem said that the Patriarch would need a lot of encouragement, however, to continue making the same message, and to make it strongly enough that it could be persuasive. In the meantime, Salem warned, the Patriarch is visited by a "parade of fools" who try to convince him that the electoral law is a plot to destroy the Maronites.

¶12. (C) Barring any clear Maronite leader to bring Baroud and Tabet back to the table, Salem argued that Lebanon's NGOs

BEIRUT 00000873 003 OF 004

and the international community would have to take the lead. He said that this was exactly the right time for Lebanon's civic-minded non-governmental organizations to step in and persuade the Maronite community to rejoin the electoral reform process for their own good and for the good of Lebanon. He said that this is the wrong time to start a public media campaign emphasizing the importance of electoral reform; he warned that the Maronites would figure someone was trying to shove a dangerous law down their throats. But he argued that a subdued yet persistent campaign by the NGOs to bring the Maronites back would have a positive effect.

¶13. (C) Salem also argued for USG help in restoring the electoral reform process: "See the Patriarch, and see the ones who seeing him, too," he urged us. Salem said the United States and the international community could deliver a strong message without violating the Maronites, sense of independence by emphasizing the importance of electoral reform for Lebanon's Christians and Lebanon as a whole. "Tell them they should be helpful, but that what they're doing now is not helpful. Explain that the options we have are the best they've ever seen. If they have concerns, fine. Bring them to the table. Explain what they want, and what they're afraid of. But let them know that they are being ridiculous, and that for something this important, they have to behave responsibly. They should know that their behavior now is irresponsible and dangerous."

¶14. (C) Salem suggested that the United States and the international community should also communicate some of our

own displeasure that the Maronites are sabotaging an electoral reform process that we have all supported and endorsed, and that, if they pull out now, it will make everyone look bad. "They should know everyone has supported them on this, but that they are frittering away their best opportunities now, and that they are making the Christians look very bad."

SALEM OFFERS TO HELP  
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¶15. (C) Salem admitted that, for the United States to assuage Maronite concerns, we would need a detailed understanding of the proposals under consideration. Salem then offered to see Emboffs again early next week to explain the major districting proposals, and why they would not marginalize the Maronites. "I have charts and maps. You'll need to see these so you can counter their arguments." Emboffs took Salem up on his offer, and will see him again on March 21.

COMMENT  
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¶16. (C) Paul Salem's dark pessimism during this meeting was an almost 180-degree turn from his previous forecasts for electoral reform. Usually positive and optimistic about the national commission's progress, Salem's newfound pessimism suggests the seriousness of the current impasse. True to form, however, he never showed any personal signs of resentment or distress, as Baroud had a few days before. Salem also seems to have a reasonable interpretation of the political events surrounding the resignations (Baroud and Tabet's explanation of "technical disagreements" was never really convincing). In requesting the international community's help in bringing the Maronites back to the negotiating table, Salem seems to have a practical understanding as to how the current situation might be resolved. His offer to share the details of the commission's top districting plans demonstrates his bona fides, and it should give the Embassy a detailed understanding of the national commission's draft law held by few outside of the commission itself.

¶17. (C) Comment, continued: It is also worth noting that none of the other commission members interviewed by emboffs in the past few days have been quite as pessimistic as Salem himself (these meetings will be reported septel). So while the situation remains serious, it may not be quite as bad as Salem seemed to think. Baroud and Tabet reportedly met with Prime Minister Siniora and Commission Chair Fouad Boutros this weekend, and may be closer to rejoining the commission. Embassy staff will meet with Baroud for a further update. End comment.

BEIRUT 00000873 004 OF 004

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